

## Korea: A Hermit Nation?

Edward J. Shultz, Professor of Asian Studies, Interim Dean, School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii.

In the late nineteenth century William Griffis (1843-1928), then residing in Japan, wrote a book titled **Corea: The Hermit Nation**. Although no expert on Korea, Griffis had spent years living in Asia and came upon this title as a catchy way to describe Korea, and unfortunately the name stuck. Griffis chose the title in part because Korea in the mid-nineteenth century had few contacts with the western world and seemed to shun diplomatic ties.<sup>1</sup> Little was known in the West about Korea and foreigners could choose incidents to support what ever view they wished to present. By looking at incidents like the Dutchmen held captive before they escaped in the seventeenth century, or the attack on and sinking of the **USS General Sherman**, writers could indeed point to a hermitic trait in Korean ties with the outside. Alternately, there was ample evidence that Koreans treated shipwrecked sailors well, and although repatriation was a long process, it did eventually occur. Furthermore, Korea maintained frequent diplomatic exchanges with China and also sent embassies on occasion to Japan. Besides these formal contacts, there were frequent unofficial exchanges throughout East Asia. Korea in the nineteenth century was wary of foreigners, in part because of the devastating Hideyoshi invasions from 1592 to 1598, and the Manchu invasions of the 1630s. Although Korea was wary, Korea was not a hermit.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Griffis, **Corea, the Hermit Nation**, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889, For an account of this book, see Young Ick Lew, "Contributions by Western Scholars to Modern Korean Historiography in Korea, with Emphasis on the RAS-KB," Transactions, Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, vol. (2005, 3-18. Lew notes on p. 6 that this book "exerted a decisive influence upon a large number of western readers wishing to learn about the 'Hermit Nation.'" The idea of Korea being a Hermit nation has been challenged by others such as Yi Tae-Jin, "Was Korea Really a 'Hermit Nation'?" **Korea Journal** 38:4 (Winter 1998): 5-35.

The theme of this conference “Cultural Interaction with Korea –From the Silk Road to the Korean Wave,” is a much more precise way to consider Korea’s links with the outside. It is my contention that Korean culture traditionally was not one of exclusion, and not one of isolation, but a culture of engagement, a culture that adapted to and at times sought outside influences. Sir Hamilton Gibb, a famed scholar of Islamic cultures once wrote that “the real quality of any civilization is shown less perhaps by its indigenous products than by the way in which it constantly grafts new shoots on to its trunk, to stimulate further growth and to achieve richer and more diversified products.”<sup>2</sup> To Gibb a high level of cultural borrowing and adaptation is the true measure of a dynamic culture. Gibb also reminded us that a society cannot borrow from another until it is ready and can use the new technology or ideas. Another European historian A.R. Lewis, in his book **The Northern Seas**, also noted that it is often the movement along trade routes that dictate the dynamism of a society. In medieval Europe culture and prosperity followed trade routes.<sup>3</sup> Where borders are open to exchange, cultures flourish, when these routes are cut off, societies suffocate. Again quoting from Gibb,

Not only have all cultures expanded by developing their own resources with the assistance of elements derived from other cultures, but when they cease to do so- when their peoples begin to regard their cultural achievements as self-sufficient and to imagine that they have nothing to learn from the outside- then decline and stagnation set in.<sup>4</sup>

Korea’s very successes, both in the past and present, give evidence to the veracity of these themes. Korea’s long history shows it not to have been hermit like, but one with

---

<sup>2</sup> Sir Hamilton Gibb, “The Influence of Islamic Culture on Medieval Europe” (hereafter “Islamic Culture”), in **Change in Medieval Society**, edited by Sylvia L. Thrupp, New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1964, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> A.R. Lewis, **The Northern Seas., A.D. 300-1100**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Gibb, “Islamic Culture,” p. 158.

relatively open borders and a tradition of cultural borrowing. Moreover, Koreans did not see themselves as an inferior or lesser people but every bit equal culturally to their neighbors.

China calls itself the middle kingdom (chungguk, chungguo). But as Gary Ledyard of Columbia University once pointed out, Korea is the real middle kingdom. Geographically in East Asia, Korea is situated in the middle, between China and Japan. Often to go from China to Japan or vice versa one had to pass by or through Korea. Because of its middle location Korea played an important role in the transfer of continental culture to Japan, often adapting Chinese norms to suit a Korean environment and then passing it on to Japan. The transmission of Buddhism to Japan is one of the best examples of this role of Korea as the “middle man.” This transfer of culture also took Korean adaptations back to China as seen in the Korean monks who refined Chinese Chan thought and reintroduced the Korean interpretations back to China. This concept of Korea being in the middle can also be seen in the role of institutions and art. For example Chinese architectural standards dictated the construction of many structures in East Asia and yet Korea modified Chinese norms to suit a Korean environment, and then Japan further adapted them. In this way, traditional buildings in East Asia look alike, but on closer inspection differences appear.

Korea’s position as the middle kingdom emerges in the role of Chang Pogo, an historical figure made popular by the Korean drama “Haesin” (Emperor of the Sea). The Silla people, and hence Chang Pogo were the great mariners of the eighth and ninth centuries. When the Japanese monk Ennin traveled to China, he was relieved to discover that the navigator was Korean, and despite the perils he encountered on sea, he remained

confident that his Korean sailors would reach their goal. Besides Chang Pogo, there were many other Korean merchants that plied the waters between Japan, China, and Korea. Today Korea is once again assuming the role of a transportation center for East Asia. Pusan, one of the largest ports in the area, accepts cargoes from around the world and then transships them on to Japan and China. Incheon International Airport is rapidly expanding into playing a similar role in aviation.

Korea's early kingdoms prospered in part because of their overseas links. Koguryŏ shared a border with different Chinese states and had frequent contact with those states. Currently several western based scholars and I are working on a translation of the **Samguk sagi** with scholars at the Academy of Korean studies, and we have just finished translating the Annals of Koguryŏ (Koguryŏ pongi). In reading the Koguryŏ Annals it is immediately obvious that hardly a year passes by without some exchange with China as official missions and trade visits, or in less peaceful times, warfare, mark the contact. Koguryŏ clearly had an identity separate from that of China, and carried many traits that we have come to know as Korean, but Koguryŏ flourished in part because of its proximity to the Chinese states. And Koguryŏ's successes were not unique. The two other "Three Kingdoms," Paekche and Silla, also enjoyed and benefited from associations with the Chinese states.

One of the best and clearest ways to understand this theme of Korea's openness to the outside is to look at the transmission of Buddhism into Korea. Buddhism entered Koguryŏ and Paekche at roughly the same time in the later fourth century, and was officially recognized in Silla over 100 years later. Nevertheless, with the acceptance of this new continental faith, each society changed dramatically. Most notable was the rapid

consolidation of royal power followed by the expansion of the state. Moreover, Buddhism provided a new faith that helped prepare believers spiritually and psychologically to address the issues of the day. And not to overemphasize the obvious, but a literate, scholarly class developed out of Buddhism and, nourished by these outside influences, the art and architecture of Silla, Paekche, and Koguryŏ also adapted to new continental themes.

Foreign contacts, and particularly those emanating from China, impacted Korea in many ways and most prominently in the unification of the Three Kingdoms in the seventh century. Tang China's invasion of both Paekche and Koguryŏ weakened these states and enabled Silla to assume control over them, but even before the unification wars started, China played a significant role in the push toward unification. It is ironic that of the three kingdoms, Silla, the most distanced and isolated from China, would play the role of the ultimate unifier. Silla early on established friendly ties with China, perhaps because it was situated far enough away not to pose a threat. Kim Ch'unch'u, the future King Muryŏl, lived for a number of years in China and knew the Tang emperor on a personal basis. Certainly this friendship helped smooth the way for greater cooperation between the two states.

With unification Silla people played a prominent role in the world outside of Korea. It was during the Tang that the splendors of the Silk Road linked the eastern world with the western world and Silla was no stranger here. Silla monks traveled to China and some went even further to India. The **Haedong Kosŭngchŏn** (Lives of Eminent Korean Monks) is filled with accounts of monks like Hyech'o (704-?) who studied in India and then returned to China where they fostered a richer understanding of Buddhism. Korean

monastic communities also established themselves in China and the above mentioned monk Ennin described in his diary a flourishing Korean monastic complex in the Shandong peninsula.

Students from the Korean peninsula also flocked to China and frequently passed at the top of the state civil service examination, revealing a mastery of the Confucian classics equal to anyone. Some of these people worked in the Tang state apparatus while others returned to Korea with novel ideas and knowledge. Just as today's international students have greatly enriched Korean science and the business world, the Silla students of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries kept Korea in contact with the latest technology and scholarship. Koreans even played important roles in the Tang government and one of the most famous Koreans was the Tang general Gao Xianzhi. Although Gao ended up somewhat notorious in that he led his army to a disastrous defeat in 751, he did exemplify the important leadership role Koreans assumed within the Tang military. One other area of obvious importance in this international exchange was the role played by Silla merchants. The impact of men such as Chang Pogo has already been mentioned, but many other men and families traversed the sea routes separating Korea and China at this time to keep the two states close at many levels.

Visually Korea's role in the outside world is best expressed in its art. A trip to the Kyōngju National Museum reveals fine cut glass ornaments and pitchers that came to Silla from the Middle East. The sitting Sakayamuni Buddha in Sokkuram reveals the international Gupta style of sculpture, linking it to the sitting Buddha found in Yungang in central Asia and Nara Japan. The beauty of Tabotap in Pulguksa reveals Indian influences joined with unique Korean sensitivities. Some of the stone figures that line

Silla tombs are representations of men straight off the Silk Road and clearly demonstrate that Silla was not an isolated, hermit-like society but one open to outside influences and a flourishing partner in the known world.

When Koryŏ succeeded Silla, this international posture did not change. Koryŏ nurtured frequent and close contacts with a number of states both in China and Manchuria. After Song assumed control of China in 961, Koryŏ established diplomatic links with the new Chinese state and exchanged embassies on a frequent basis. Because of difficulties with northern Manchurian states, these formal diplomatic exchanges sometimes stopped, but informal exchanges through merchants, students, and scholars continued unabated. In fact, one Song scholar complained that Koreans were so ubiquitous that they were taking books from China and these editions could only be found in Korea.

Koreans also welcomed Chinese into their government. When Kwangjong the fourth Koryŏ monarch, wished to invigorate his government by launching the state civil service examination, he sought direct advice from the Chinese scholar Shuang Chi who came to live in Kaegyŏng the Koryŏ capital. Many other Chinese scholars would move to Koryŏ where they held positions of prominence in the government and advised monarchs and officials on institutional reforms.

Not only scholars, but merchants found their way to Korea. In Uijong's reign (1146-1170), one author noted there were over 1700 merchants that disembarked at Koryŏ's major port of Yesong. Another study noted that between 1012 and 1170 there were more

than 110 entries in the *Koryŏsa* reporting on merchants from Song visiting Koryŏ.<sup>5</sup> These merchants came not only from China but from more distant places such as Arabia.

One of the keys to Koryŏ's dynamism is that fact that many of Koryŏ's leading statesmen had traveled to other countries, most notably Song China, or the Manchurian Khitan or Jurchen states. In a study I completed, I discovered that between 1096 and 1146, a period of fifty years, 188 men are listed in the official Koryŏ records as envoys dispatched to one of those states.<sup>6</sup> Of these men, 104 are virtually unknown as there is no other entry in the dynastic records on them other than the one citation mentioning their assignment to an embassy. Of the remaining 84, the sources are much more descriptive. And studying this group, the high caliber and importance of these envoys is immediately obvious. At least forty three passed the state examination (*kwagŏ*), and if the records were complete, this would undoubtedly be an even higher number, but the point is clear. Koryŏ sent on these missions its best people whose training in Confucian ideology and basic intelligence enabled them to pass the esteemed state examination

These envoys created a favorable impression when meeting for example with Song officials. Xu Jing, a Song emissary who visited Koryŏ in 1123, recorded his impressions of his journey and praised the men of Koryŏ. He singled out Kim Pusik whom he describes as "Broad in learning and strong in knowledge. His likes tend to the literary... There is none who is more esteemed."<sup>7</sup> Twelve years earlier Pusik's brother Puch'ŏl

---

<sup>5</sup> Kim Sangi "Yosong muyok sogo," in **Tongbang munhwa kyoryusa nongo**. Seoul: 1949, 55-64.

<sup>6</sup> The names are found in the **Koryŏsa** (hereafter cited as **KS**), Yonsei edition (Seoul, 1972) and the **Koryŏsa chŏryŏ** (hereafter cited as **KSC**) Hosa bunk edition (Tokyo, 1960), and *Asea munhwasa* (Seoul, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> **Kaoli tujing**, (hereafter cited as **KT**), *Asea munhwasa* edition (Seoul, 1972), p. 45. Because of Xu Jing's favorable description, the Song court looked forward to meeting Kim Pusik when he traveled to Song in 1126, see **KSC** 11:7b.

gained the admiration of the Song emperor for his ability to compose literary works. In examining the men who led Koryŏ at this time, nearly all of the key leaders had traveled at least once to a foreign country. The path to success in the Koryŏ officialdom clearly included traveling as an official emissary to a foreign state. Dynastic leaders from every reign of this period, men such as Yun Kwan, Han Anin or Kim Pusik and his brothers, all traveled abroad as official Koryŏ envoys.

Many of the men who went on these missions were especially active in sustaining foreign ties. At least twenty men went on foreign missions more than once, some perhaps even three or four times.<sup>8</sup> Kim Tan is an interesting case. In 1115 the Koryŏ dynasty sent Kim and several other men to study in China. Upon his return several years later, he passed a special state examination. During Yejong's reign (1122-1146), Kim concerned himself with foreign ties and went as an official envoy to Jin in 1130 and then in 1135. Earlier when Xu Jing visited Kaegyŏng he mentioned meeting with Kim and as late as 1142 Kim was entertaining Jin officials. Impressed by Koryŏ's "diplomatic corps," Xu noted, "Every time envoys from the Chinese court arrived, Koryŏ always selected men of talent or those who had traveled on tribute missions to serve as entertainment officers."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to being well-versed in foreign ties, many Koryŏ diplomats actively forged domestic policy. As just noted, most key dynastic leaders had traveled on a foreign mission. The impact of serving on these embassies was undoubtedly profound. While in foreign capitals these envoys learned about the society that they were visiting and had

---

<sup>8</sup> These embassies often included over 300 people. See Michael Rogers, "The Regularization of Koryŏ-Chin Relations (1116-1131)" *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 6 (1961), Presumably, as was the case later in Chosŏn, functionaries made numerous trips on these missions. See Chon Haejong, "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations in the Ch'ing Period," in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> *KT*, p. 42

opportunities to meet with and discuss with interested hosts a variety of topics from philosophy to military technology. On returning to Koryŏ these former envoys, benefiting from these experiences, could approach governmental issues with a broader perspective and understanding. Yejong used many of these men to offer lectures on the Confucian classics. Many of these same men became active in proposing various reforms that would have curtailed the power of overreaching powerful aristocrats such as Yi Chagyŏm. Many of the leaders who opposed the monk Myoch'ŏng's designs to invade Jin in the 1130s, were men who had traveled abroad and possessed a realistic understanding of Koryŏ's international posture.

Koryŏ's international relations are a key factor in explaining Koryŏ's success. Through foreign affairs Koryŏ officials received training and learned about other cultures. These experiences provided them with a rich background that enabled them to confront national crisis, whether it be domestic or foreign in origin, with a broad cosmopolitan perspective. Moreover, Koryŏ benefited by having a group of high caliber, professional diplomats who in determining policy were not bound by ideology or precedent but only by Koryŏ national interest. By bringing skill to Koryŏ's domestic policy and advances to Koryŏ culture, they enabled Koryŏ to participate actively in the achievements of twelfth century East Asia.

If scholars can characterize early and mid Koryŏ as one of close contact abroad, Mongol domination forced even greater exchange in late Koryŏ. Scholars have generally come to accept the idea that for much of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a Pax Mongolica or Mongol Peace pervaded much of the world as barriers disappeared and goods and ideas flowed along the Silk Road from East to West. Korea at the edge of this

Mongolian world order likewise benefited as in the past through close contacts with ideas and technology emerging in China and further to the West. Men fluent in the Mongolian language advanced in Korean court circles. Korean kings often grew up in the Mongol court and Korean women became imperial concubines, and one even the mother of an emperor.

Korea's last dynasty, the Chosŏn (1392-1910), sustained this tradition of outside contacts, even if at times it was more cautious in its dealings with foreign states. Official embassies traveled between Beijing and Seoul at regular intervals, keeping each side fully informed of developments in their respected states. Koreans also maintained both official and unofficial contacts with Japan.<sup>10</sup> Except for the late sixteenth century when Hideyoshi launched his attacks, ties with Japan lacked the urgency Koreans applied to maintaining stable relations with China.

Korean students during the Ming and Qing period, as seen previously in Silla and Koryŏ, studied in China and took a special interest in philosophy and art. In part through these contacts, Korean scholarship sustained a high level of sophistication and Korean art incorporated many Chinese themes. China also became a source to learn about the West. In China Korean students and envoys met with Jesuit missionaries and quickly became intrigued with the sophistication of the Western calendar, map making, and other technologies. Some also took an interest in Christianity and worked to bring that religion into Korea. As much of the western experience was peripheral to eighteenth and nineteenth century Chosŏn, this lack of interest led some such as Griffis to label Korea a hermit nation.

---

<sup>10</sup> For a list of possible references, see Ken Robinson's bibliography on the Center for Korean Studies web page [www.hawaii.edu/korea](http://www.hawaii.edu/korea)

In making this quick historical review, a pattern to Korea's ties with the outside clearly emerges. Despite long distances, despite transportation difficulties, and all the other hurdles to exchange, Koreans made the journeys and sustained active ties with their known outside world. They did this for many reasons. Some were simply curious about the "other" or sought adventure. This trait is not unique to Koreans but found in most societies. People often are looking for other solutions to current problems and seeking new answers to old issues. Koreans for centuries have lived beside the huge power China, which has made them willing to look for answers beyond themselves. As Koreans confront issues of governance, or scholarship, or just plain living, they have come to accept the idea that there are other solutions than just those found within Korea. Koreans have long accepted the notion that the outside can instruct. Although the viability of the Silk Road changed from era to era, its legacy of accepting change from the outside continued to impact Korean attitudes. Certainly Sir Hamilton Gibb's points mentioned above apply to the Korean experience. In my own studies I have been continually struck by the confidence in which Koreans have confronted the world over their long history, and they have been able to establish this confidence in part because they have maintain an active knowledge of the outside world. And it is only in times that they shun this posture and seek to isolate themselves that they run into great difficulties. A current dissertation titled "When Truth is Everywhere: The Formation of Plural Identities in Early Koryŏ" posits the theme that Koryŏ prospered in part because of its pluralistic attitude that allowed for competing ideologies and rather than demanding simple either or answers.<sup>11</sup> Koryŏ leaders accepted and even flourish by forwarding a variety of outlooks.

---

<sup>11</sup> Remco Breuker, Draft dissertation, University of Leiden, 2006.

Societies run into dangers when they give way to the great simplifiers who demand either/or solutions. It is this openness, this pluralistic attitude that explains Korea's success and has helped give Korea almost a transnational identity.

Some scholars have looked at Korea's ties with the outside and especially China as one of deference or *sadae*. This too strikes me as simplistic reasoning. Koreans certainly recognized that a powerful neighbor such as China could dispatch an armed force that would bring havoc to the country, but in the field of ideas and daily life, Koreans did not cower before China. Koreans treated China with respect but they refuted China's claims when pressed. Koreans confronted the world beyond their borders with a clear sense of equality and confidence.

These themes of confidence, pluralism and a transnational identity certainly are rooted in the Korean diaspora as Koreans sought to escape the deteriorating conditions within Korea in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Koreans took their values and their identity overseas where they attempted to build new lives but frequently remained emotionally tied to their homeland. Andre Schmid makes the important point in his study **Korea between Empires** that it was in the diasporic communities that the sense of a Korean identity and a Korean nation remained alive, although the Korean homeland had been taken over by a colonial power.<sup>12</sup> Today the Korean nation again exists in its homeland, but Koreans still take their values and culture overseas. In August I visited the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaator and was surprised at first to find in that distant city a Korean temple within a Mongolian temple complex. But then again, why shouldn't there be a Korean temple in Mongolia?

---

<sup>12</sup> Andre Schmid, **Korea: Between Empires**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Koreans continue to build new communities abroad and through these new centers, they impact their host cultures as well, and this is just one more way in which the old silk route has expanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Looking at my own very small community of Hawai'i, Koreans, although rarely making up more than three percent of the entire population, have had a significant presence in our Islands. Koreans have been active in politics and law and the current chief justice of the Hawai'i Supreme Court is a third generation Korean American named Ronald Moon. The recently retired chief of police of Honolulu is a half Korean named Lee Donahue, the Hawai'i superintendent of education is Patrica Lee Hamamoto, the mayor of one of our islands is Harry Kim. Korean churches are all over the islands, and perhaps the most famous Korean American is a high school senior and golf star named Michelle Wei. If Korean Americans who make up such a small percentage of Hawaii's population can have such a dramatic impact in one corner of the globe, how much more can we expect with greater numbers? Korean Americans have flourished in part because of the American environment that provides a relatively equal playing field with chances or opportunities for most all. But they have also succeeded in part because of this strong Korean tradition that keeps them open to other ideas and looking for new solutions. Indeed it is in part the legacy of the Silk Road that impells Korean Americans, and other Korean diasporic communities.

The success of the Korean Wave is yet another transformation of this Silk Route legacy. Korean pop culture as expressed in its dramas, its films, its pop singers, and its other stars has succeed because of its willingness to try new things, to experiment. The Korean Wave speaks from a very strong sense of the Korean self but it has also been able to capture a transnational appeal. The current stewards of the Korean wave, much like those

Korean travelers of the seventh, twelfth or fifteen centuries, or those pioneers who ventured overseas in the nineteenth than twentieth centuries, have carried with them a willingness to experiment and try new things. Korean culture is successful today as in the past because it is not one of exclusion and not one of isolation but one that energetically engages the world both receiving from and contributing to it. To those who believe that Koreans by nature are hermits or who call Korea a hermit nation, history and contemporary life gives a resounding response that this is not the case.